

CANON AND SPEECH ACT:
LIMITATIONS IN SPEECH-ACT THEORY,
WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR A PUTATIVE THEORY
OF CANONICAL SPEECH ACTS

VERN SHERIDAN POYTHRESS

The theory of speech acts, as developed by John Austin and John R. Searle, sets language in the context of human action and inquires about the functions and purposes of human action that are accomplished by sentences.¹ This viewpoint is potentially useful in considering the canon of Scripture, and indeed has already been so used.² The canon of Scripture is not just a natural object like a set of dinosaur bones, but a cultural product, and, yes—most emphatically—a divine product as well, with attendant personal purposes associated with its production. Inquiring about those purposes helps us to assess the meaning of canon in the context of who God is and the relation of his words to his redemptive deeds.³

But if we are to use speech-act theory in analyzing the canon as a whole, or in attending to the purposes of any small piece of biblical text, it helps to be aware of limitations in the theory. To explore those limitations is my purpose. Inevitably a focus on limitations is going to sound negative. So I should say at the beginning

Vern S. Poythress is Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary. This article is based on a paper presented to the eastern regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, March 14, 2008.

¹ The foundational works are John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962); and John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969). See also John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); William P. Alston, *Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964); and critique in Armin Burkhard, ed., *Speech Acts, Meaning and Intentions: Critical Approaches to the Philosophy of John R. Searle* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1990). Speech-act theory has roots in the later writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

² One thinks, for example, of Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002); Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Wolterstorff, "The Promise of Speech-act Theory for Biblical Interpretation," in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 73-90.

³ On the relation of word and deed, see Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), esp. 14-17.

that I am not really criticizing speech-act theory at its best, but rather attempting to head off misuses and oversimplifications, as well as lack of awareness concerning the simplifications that enter into the formation of the theory.

I. *Classification of Speech Acts*

What is speech-act theory? It describes and classifies the different kinds of things that people do when they use sentences in actual speech. According to John Searle's classification, there are five general categories.⁴ (1) "Assertives," such as "I went to town yesterday," "commit the speaker . . . to the truth of the expressed proposition."⁵ (2) "Directives," such as "Go to town," "are attempts . . . to get the hearer to do something."⁶ (3) "Commissives," such as "I promise to go to town," "committ [*sic*] the speaker . . . to some future course of action."⁷ (4) "Expressives," such as "I apologize," express a "psychological state" about a situation.⁸ (5) "Declarations," such as "I resign," "bring about the correspondence between the propositional content and reality."⁹ All five kinds of speech acts can be found within the Bible. One of the points of speech-act theory is to awaken us to the fact that assertions of fact are only one of a number of kinds of speech act.

Such awareness has value. Evangelical defenses of propositional revelation have often concentrated on arguing for the inerrancy of the Bible's *assertions*. Such concentration is legitimate, given that the propositional content and the inerrancy of the Bible's assertions have been the focus of outside attacks. But one needs to observe as well that divine authority belongs to the Bible's commands and promises, not just to its assertions.

II. *Starting with the Simple*

Speech-act theory, like any theory, is selective in its attention to human behavior. What are the consequent strengths and weaknesses? What does it leave out, or at least put in the background?

John Searle specifically acknowledges some simplifications:

I am ignoring more complex types of subject expressions, relational predicate expressions, and molecular propositions. Until we can get clear about the simple cases we are hardly likely to get clear about the more complicated ones.¹⁰

⁴ Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, viii, 12-20. Compare this classification with that of John Austin in *How to Do Things*, 150-63, and note Searle's expression of dissatisfaction with Austin's classification (Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 8-12). Speech-act theory concerns itself not only with classification, but with making some key distinctions among sentences, utterances, and the social commitments made using utterances.

⁵ Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

¹⁰ Searle, *Speech Acts*, 33.

Yes, the standard procedure in many kinds of modern analysis starts with simple, “atomic” cases. The atomic cases are the simplest, and one can hardly hope “to get clear” about complex cases without a basis in simple cases. One builds up from atoms to molecules to macroscopic structures.

The difficulty lies in the assumption that such analysis leaves nothing essential aside. But of course it does. It leaves aside context. Even within the field of chemistry, the behavior of atoms depends strongly on how they are bonded to other atoms. So it is with human communication. The decision to start with atomic propositions is a decontextualizing move, and all such moves are problematic when, as is the case with human language, context is essential to meaning. In this case, the context includes the complexity of human beings, who are the speakers and conversationalists, and the complexity of their environment, which includes world history and the God who rules it.¹¹

One can still achieve impressive results with this kind of analysis, because it does observe features of language and communication that are actually there. But will one along the way forget the initial simplifications? Let us suppose that one becomes “clear” about simple cases—because one has systematically ignored sources of complexity. Will one then take pride in one’s alleged deep insight? And then will one out of pride *impose* the same “clarity” on complexity, by simply smashing out the complexity and forcing it into the mold crafted by one’s “clarity”? The fault here would not be with speech-act theory itself, narrowly conceived, but with the practitioner who forgets its innate limitations.

III. *Issues of Hierarchy*

So let us consider how smaller, “atomic” speech acts are embedded in larger contexts.

Speech-act theory classifies speech acts into various kinds. Speech acts include asking a question, making a promise, pronouncing a verdict, or issuing a command. These are all classes of verbal behavioremes, as defined by Kenneth L. Pike.¹² We cannot here enter into a thorough exposition of behavioremes. We need to use only a few observations, using a specific example as our starting point.

¹¹ Note how, in discussing indirect speech acts, which are one form of complexity, Searle rightly appeals to many dimensions of human knowledge both about the environment and about the assumptions and commitments of other human beings. This context is not formalizable, and Searle does not suggest otherwise (Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 34-35).

¹² Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (2d ed.; The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 37-149. Pike’s technical definition of the behavioreme is “an emic segment or component of purposive human activity, hierarchically and trimodally structured, having closure signalled by overt objective cultural clues within the verbal or nonverbal behavior of the domestic participants or domestic observers, and occurring thorough [*sic*; through] its free or conditioned, simple or complex variants within a behavioral system (or composite of systems) and a physical setting which are also emically, hierarchically and trimodally structured. A verbal behavioreme is an UTTEREME” (ibid., 121). Among verbal behavioremes Kenneth Pike lists the following: a judge’s giving sentence, a lawyer’s argument, the President’s annual message to Congress, a sermon, an umpire’s decision; greetings, calls, questions; requests, commands; statements; singing a song, chorus,

A basketball game is a complex behavior. It has three interlocking dimensions. First, it has a unity or identity, and *contrasts* with other types of games and other types of activity. We can speak of its *contrastive-identificational* features. Second, it has *variation*. That is, there are many different basketball games that differ in detail. Third, it is *distributed* within larger contexts of human activities—a series of games in a season, and other human activities during the same day.¹³

Speech-act theory focuses primarily on the contrastive-identificational features that characterize particular kinds of behavior.¹⁴ But what becomes of the distributional aspect of these behaviors? Small speech acts are embedded (“distributed”) within larger groupings of human behavior. Speech-act theory does encourage reflection about contextual conditions that may be necessary for the happy execution of a speech act.¹⁵ The condition of being an umpire is necessary in order to call a strike in a baseball game. But because of the focus on atomic propositions, there is little attention to the way in which behaviors can be embedded in larger behaviors in a hierarchical array, and how several smaller purposeful human actions may together accomplish a larger purpose.

The choral singer, for example, not only has the purpose of singing a song, but singing in concert with others to produce a harmonious and elegant result. Within the context of a worship service, the choral singer has the larger purpose of praising God and leading the people in such praise. Moreover, the choral singer participates in a *corporate* speech act with the other singers. Speech-act theory, by its exclusive focus on individual acts, puts in the background the reality of corporate cooperative acts, corporate competitive and antagonistic acts, and the corporate purpose of speech behavior in contexts like group discussions.

Even within a monologue we find complexities in human purpose, partly because of hierarchical relationships. A political speaker makes a request (a speech act) as part of an apology (a larger speech act?—but it is no longer “atomic”), as part of an explanation (a behavior) as part of a political speech (a larger behavior).¹⁶ The speech as a whole rhetorically has several

vocal solo, cantata, oratorio, aria, chant, participation in a choir practice session; giving a joke, limrick, parody, pun, or comedy; and others (*ibid.*, 138-39). All of these are similar in some ways to speech acts.

¹³ On contrast, variation, and distribution, see Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 39-67. In Pike, *Language*, these three are called the feature mode, the manifestation mode, and the distribution mode of the behavior.

¹⁴ The focus on classificational features is especially obvious in Searle, “A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts,” in *Expression and Meaning*, 1-19. But it is evident more widely in the concern for distinguishing major kinds of speech acts.

¹⁵ See especially Searle, *Speech Acts*, 12-45.

¹⁶ In J. L. Austin’s exposition of speech acts (*How to Do Things*), it is not clear whether he is intending to analyze only single sentences that are also complete utterances (monologues), or to include all single sentences whether or not they are complete utterances, or to include all complete utterances, or to include paragraphs or sections within larger complete utterances. For simplicity he focuses on the utterance of single sentences that are also complete utterances, leaving to one side the additional complexities with hierarchy.

purposes, to praise his party, to justify its policies, to rally and encourage the faithful, to raise funds, and to promote his own election.¹⁷ The embedded request represents not just a speech act of making a request, but also a verbal behavior that serves the several larger purposes. Description in terms of speech acts may sometimes stop with saying, “He is making a request.” That is technically correct. But it focuses on only one aspect (the contrastive-identificational aspect of a particular verbal behavior).

Next, are we attending to *variation*? Suppose the particular politician’s request runs, “Please do not judge me harshly.” That is a request. So far so good. But it is also a particular *kind* of request. It is a request with respect to audience behavior in moral and judicial evaluation, not a request to donate money, or to cheer more loudly, or to talk to their friends about the campaign, or to take heart. More specifically still, it is a request that indirectly warns the audience against the temptation to be harsh in judgment. It suggests a plea for mercy, but avoids an overt admission that the speaker *needs* mercy (which might in turn suggest that what he did is actually quite wicked). More specifically still, it is a request of this kind that politely asks (“Please”), and thereby indicates respect for the audience and for social graces.

Does an analysis in terms of speech acts merely say, “He is making a request”? A generality may be true enough, but it focuses on the general rather than all the specifics. The specifics are also a meaningful part of human action. The difficulty here is that meaning in the world of persons and personal action is so rich and multidimensional that no theory can master it. Therefore analysts, in their desire to be “scientific” and precise, run the risk of neglecting all but

John Searle in his foundational exposition concerning speech acts is also not clear about the role of hierarchy in human action. It appears that he simplifies by focusing on sentence-level speech acts: “The characteristic grammatical form of the illocutionary act is the complete sentence (it can be a one-word sentence)” (Searle, *Speech Acts*, 25). Most of the time Searle further simplifies to sentences with a single clause (cf. *ibid.*, 33).

By contrast, a verbal behavior, also called an “utterance,” is a unit that allows for embedding. When they appear in conversation, phonemes, morphemes, words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, and whole monologues are all utterances. The speaker “does something” with purpose when he utters them. Thus Pike’s category of “utterance” is better adapted to include the full range of purposeful verbal action, both at lower levels (word, phrase) and higher levels (paragraph). See also Kevin Vanhoozer’s discussion of a hierarchy of acts in “From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts,” in *First Theology*, 191-94.

¹⁷ The actual *bringing about* of the intended goals may in many cases be classified as “perlocutionary effect” rather than “illocutionary act” (see the distinction introduced by Austin, *How to Do Things*, 94-107). But when certain intentions concerning effects are made manifest in a particular speech, the manifestation of those intentions—though not their effects on the audience—is often one aspect of what the speaker does in speaking. The speaker can be held responsible for commitments that he makes in speech with respect to effects on the audience. On occasion, he can even be held partly responsible for an audience response that he incites, or fails to incite, when he is in a position to do so. So the line between illocution and perlocution is delicate. And a given verbal behavior (speech act) will often be embedded in sequence in a still larger behavior, which may include the audience consequences within it.

some one dimension, or a small number of dimensions, that can be selected out and flattened enough so that one can be “rigorous.”¹⁸

The classification of speech acts into different types, such as assertion, promise, and command, helps us to notice the variety of ways in which human beings use language. That is most helpful in broadening the field, and correcting an earlier philosophical viewpoint that thought of the essence of language as consisting in propositions that were used to make assertive claims about the facts of the world. Promises and commands do different things than do assertions. Assertions endeavor to fit words to the world, while commands propose new actions in the world that will fit the words in the command. The direction of fit is different.¹⁹

But now can there be more complex cases? Can human verbal actions have purposes and make commitments in multiple dimensions? Surely they can, because human actions are capable of having multiple interlocking purposes and making complex commitments. Consider the request, “Please tell me what you read yesterday, and what you thought of it.” This request may have complex purposes. Like other requests, it proposes an action that fits the words. But a request, in distinction from a command, invites the respondent to have a certain flexibility that matches his personality and needs. In this respect, the requester wishes his words to fit the person. And so the subsequent action—or decision not to act—will fit the person as well. And the request also asks to be informed about the world, the world of the person, and the world of the book he read. This complexity arises even with a request that grammatically is fairly simple. What about sarcasm? What about jokes, used to teach or persuade?

To his credit, Searle acknowledges at the conclusion of his taxonomy of speech acts, “Often, we do more than one of these [kinds of acts] at once in the same utterance.”²⁰ It is easy for later students to overlook that qualification.

One can enrich the picture being developed in speech-act theory by noting, as Roman Jakobson does, that any one use of language has multiple purposeful dimensions. Jakobson distinguishes emotive, conative, referential, poetic, phatic, and metalingual dimensions.²¹ Roughly speaking, the emotive dimension concerns what the speaker reveals about his attitudes; the conative concerns the impact on recipients; the referential concerns information about the world; the phatic concerns the way in which the communication expresses and affects the social bond between speaker and hearer; the metalingual concerns what the speech reveals about language as a code; and the poetic concerns ways in which a message focuses on itself, perhaps by rhythm or alliteration. All of

¹⁸ J. L. Austin states the problem well with respect to philosophical analysis: “And we must at all costs avoid over-simplification, which one might be tempted to call the occupational disease of philosophers if it were not their occupation” (Austin, *How to Do Things*, 38).

¹⁹ See Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 3-4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

²¹ Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style in Language* (ed. Thomas A. Sebeok; Cambridge, Mass.: Technology Press, M.I.T., 1960), 353-58.

these dimensions are present in all communication, but one or more may be prominent in a particular act of communication.²²

IV. *Implications for Biblical Interpretation*

Let me now suggest possible implications for biblical interpretation. Speech-act theory has been employed by some to throw light on biblical interpretation. I am grateful for this light. Focusing on the human purposes (and also divine purposes) that are manifested in various pieces of text is one legitimate kind of focus, and it may succeed many times in drawing our attention to a dimension of textual communication that we have previously overlooked. This danger of overlooking confronts “professional” interpreters as much as anyone else, precisely because the methodical and self-conscious approach of the professional pushes him strongly in the direction of paying attention *only* to those things to which his method and his self-conscious reflection tell him to pay attention.

On the other hand, speech-act theory, or genre theory, or any other theory, is not comprehensive in its attentiveness. So the danger arises that it too may over-optimistically be used as if it were the key to understanding, rather than a reminder of one more dimension in communication.

We may illustrate by considering an exhortation: “And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:2).²³ The first clause, “walk in love,” is command-like. The subsequent parts are assertion-like, in that they discuss past events and their significance. One might argue that the sentence as a whole is a command, since the main clause, “walk in love,” is imperatival in form. But suppose we break the one complex sentence into four separate sentences: “Walk in love. For Christ loved us. He gave himself up for us. In that way he was a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Now we have one command and three assertion-like sentences that back up and motivate the command. Was their assertion-like force already implied when we had only one sentence? Presumably so. In addition, even when we have four sentences, they are not independent of one another. Expressions like “for” and “in that way” link the sentences, and the sentences are subtly linked just because they are juxtaposed. So none of the three assertive sentences is *merely* an isolated assertion.

²² “Although we distinguish six basic aspects of language, we could, however, hardly find verbal messages that would fulfill only one function. The diversity lies not in a monopoly of some one of these several functions but in a different hierarchical order of functions. . . . The accessory participation of the other functions in such messages must be taken into account by the observant linguist” (*ibid.*, 353). One may compare this approach with Searle’s. Searle’s “taxonomy” (*Expression and Meaning*, viii, 12-20) includes “Assertives,” corresponding to Jakobson’s referential function; “Directives,” corresponding to the conative function; “Commissives,” corresponding most closely to the phatic function; “Expressives,” corresponding to the emotive function; and “Declarations,” corresponding to both referential and phatic functions. Searle wants a clean separation between different types, whereas Jakobson emphasizes the presence of multiple simultaneous functions for any one speech act.

²³ Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version (2001).

When we consider Eph 5:2 in the larger context of the whole NT, more complexities arise. In NT teaching we regularly find two sides, the “indicative” of what God has done in Christ and the “imperative” of what Christians are to do as a result. The two sides interlock and at a deep level imply one another. The word “as” in Eph 5:2 briefly hints at this relation.

Some people have summed up Christian life in the aphorism, “Be what you are.” We are to act in accordance with the new life that God has given to us in Christ, and Christ himself is the supreme embodiment of that new life. This situation has a factual dimension to it: not only has Christ lived and died and risen from the dead; he has also through the Holy Spirit given us new life animated by his resurrection power (Rom 8:9-13). But there is also an aspect of command: these realities, which have already become true for anyone who trusts in Christ, are to be worked out in our behavior and our attitudes.

The relation between command and assertion is intimate. Explicit commands presuppose and imply corresponding assertions. And the assertions imply corresponding commands. The first half of Ephesians focuses more on what God has accomplished (Eph 1–3), while the second half focuses more on what we are to do in response (Eph 4–6). But the two hold together (“therefore” in Eph 4:1). Any one sentence, taken in context, has multiple purposes, which include affirming facts, enjoining behavior, promising God’s blessing, and directing and strengthening belief. Typically one purpose, such as commanding, may be most prominent. But others are implied. A simple division between assertion, command, and promise not only simplifies but all too easily oversimplifies the rich reinforcement present in NT letters.

John Searle acknowledges the possibility of richness when he discusses “indirect speech acts,” that is, “cases in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another.”²⁴ But it is easy for less sophisticated users of the theory to overlook this possibility of complexity. And it is easy to think that such complexity is exceptional. But Jakobson’s classification of multiple dimensions of communication suggests that it is pervasive.²⁵

Let me put it another way. Speech-act theory, if used simplistically, tends to make people think that each sentence-level act makes a single, simple speech commitment, defined as its “illocutionary force”: it either asserts, promises, commands, wishes, or the like. But a sentence in the Bible may often have, in addition to one more obvious and direct commitment, multiple, interlocking purposes, related in multiple ways to its literary context and its addressees. Speech-act theory, seen by some of its advocates as a way for enhancing our

²⁴ Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 31. See the full discussion in *ibid.*, 30-57, and note also Searle, *Speech Acts*, 68-70.

²⁵ Searle’s discussion of indirect speech acts deals with cases where the context makes it clear that the main point is something other than the literal meaning. But even when the main point is closer to the literal meaning of a sentence, other dimensions affect the total impact of the communication.

appreciation of multiple kinds of speech in the Bible, may at the same time artificially flatten and restrict the implications of any one kind of speech.

The challenges increase when we move from considering sentences to considering the canon as a whole. The canon constitutes an exceedingly rich and complex product. It is easy to oversimplify if we try to fit it into a theory initially developed to deal with simple sentence-length utterances.

The dangers are not merely hypothetical. As an example, consider Nicholas Wolterstorff's observation that many parts of the Bible like the Psalms contain addresses to God in the second person. Therefore, he claims, they cannot be divine address in the prophetic mode.²⁶ On an elementary level, parts of the Bible are indeed distinct, in genre, in addressees, and in kinds of speech acts. But this observation easily becomes reductionistic if it is used to classify songs as *not* divine address. Because of linguistic hierarchy, a song that is supposed to be sung to God can be embedded in the divine-address discourse of Deuteronomy, by God's own command (Deut 31:19–32:47). It is thus *both* God's address to man and, when sung, man's address to God. And the song, when sung, is God's witness against Israel as well as Israel's address to God: ". . . this song shall confront them as a witness (for it will live unforgotten in the mouths of their offspring)" (Deut 31:21). Deuteronomy 31 is especially significant because it lays out the significance of the deposit of written divine words as a part of a growing canon: "Take this Book of the Law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against you" (Deut 31:26). What is deposited is part of the written documents of the covenant or treaty between God and Israel.²⁷ The later songs in the book of Psalms and elsewhere in the canon are thus to be seen as a continuation of this kind of complex, embedded, multipurpose, and multivocal speech in Deut 32.

The covenant and canon given through Moses involve rich communication. The covenant through Moses begins with direct speech of God at Mount Sinai and then the Ten Commandments written with the finger of God (Exod 31:18; Deut 9:10). Next, God commissions Moses to speak his words (Deut 5:22-33).²⁸ Later Moses writes God's law in a book (Deut 31:9-29). This writing continues the earlier commission. At the same time, the writing uses what has already been spoken; that is, it appropriates earlier discourse, including God's direct writing of the Ten Commandments.²⁹ Commissioned speech, commissioned writing, and appropriation of earlier discourse all have the same authority as direct speech and give us unfettered access to what God says. Hence, the different modes of speech and writing turn out to be perspectives on the same total

²⁶ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 52-54, 186-89, building on Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 73-118.

²⁷ Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

²⁸ In the terminology of Nicholas Wolterstorff, this kind of commissioned speech is "deputized" (Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 42-46).

²⁹ Wolterstorff (*ibid.*, 51-54) discusses "appropriated" discourse.

process of God's speech and communication, rather than being completely distinct brands of speech act and acts of writing, such as a neatly pigeon-holed classification might like to have.³⁰

We can illustrate the same complexity if we summarize the entire covenantal relation between God and Israel in a single simple declaration: "You are my people." As a summary, this sentence condenses a multifaceted relationship. The sentence is a declarative sentence, and so it most obviously is to be classified as an "Assertive" within Searle's taxonomy. It states a true fact. But the fact has become true because of God's declaration that it is to be. Hence, the sentence is also like a "Declaration." It is also a promise, since God commits himself, and so is a "Commissive." It expresses God's attitude ("Expressives") and implies an obligation of loyalty on the part of the people ("Directives"). It combines into one all five major kinds of speech acts in Searle's classification.³¹

V. Focus on the Sentence

We may now observe in more detail some of the simplifications and narrowing in focus that occur in John Searle's exploration of speech-act theory in his book *Speech Acts*. Fairly early, he chooses to focus on sentence-level speech acts, rather than longer speeches:

Since every meaningful sentence in virtue of its meaning can be used to perform a particular speech act (or range of speech acts), and since every possible speech act can in principle be given an exact formulation in a sentence or sentences [does this mean several alternative sentences any one of which could be used to manifest or illustrate the same speech act, or does it mean a paragraph or longer discourse?] (assuming an appropriate context of utterance), the study of the meanings of sentences and the study of speech acts are not two independent studies but one study from two different points of view.³²

The first and most obvious simplification here is the move to focus on sentence-level speech acts; one leaves aside more complex acts that can be built up using many sentences linked together in one or more paragraphs within a monologue.³³ The text also simplifies by apparently assuming that any one sentence has only one meaning, "its meaning." In fact, we frequently find instances

³⁰ See also Vern S. Poythress, "Divine Meaning of Scripture," *WTJ* 48 (1986): 241-79; Poythress, "The Presence of God Qualifying Our Notions of Grammatical-Historical Interpretation: Genesis 3:15 as a Test Case," *JETS* 50 (2007): 87-103.

³¹ See Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 12-20.

³² Searle, *Speech Acts*, 18; I have added my own question in brackets. See also p. 25. In a more technical discussion on pp. 30-31 Searle introduces specific technical terms, "deep structure," "phrase marker," and "deletion transformations," which belong to Chomskyan transformational generative grammar (note also the expression "generative grammar" on p. 120). The Chomskyan approach simplifies in a host of ways for the sake of rigor. Among these is the decision to treat sentences without considering their larger context in discourse. See Vern S. Poythress, "Truth and Fullness of Meaning: Fullness versus Reductionistic Semantics in Biblical Interpretation," *WTJ* 67 (2005): 211-27.

³³ Searle's statement excluding "molecular propositions" and concentrating on atomic ones occurs later in the book (*Speech Acts*, 33). But one can see its influence even at this early point.

in which a sentence is ambiguous and could sponsor more than one meaning, depending on context.³⁴ “Bob hit the man with a stick.” Was the stick the instrument that Bob used, or was the stick in the possession of “the man”? “Bob feared him.” Was the fear dread of a fellow human being, or reverential fear of God? This illustration with respect to language for God is particularly significant. Do words like “fear” have quite the same meaning when used with respect to a human being and with respect to God?

VI. *The Ideal of Complete Knowledge*

The essay also speaks about supplying for “every possible speech act” “an exact formulation in a sentence or sentences,” and says that this is possible “in principle.” But it is only “in principle.” The larger context in Searle’s book shows awareness of the fact that any one particular human language may have to be expanded or adjusted to make such a formulation possible:

I can in principle if not in fact increase my knowledge of the language, or more radically, if the existing language or existing languages are not adequate to the task, if they simply lack the resources for saying what I mean, I can in principle at least enrich the language by introducing new terms or other devices into it.³⁵

Thus Searle is not in the end interested in any particular natural language. Rather, he considers a hypothetically enriched language that would have whatever resources the speaker needs. This move to a hypothetical language is certainly an idealization.

We may note another idealization in the sentence just quoted. Searle says, “. . . if they simply lack the resources for saying what I mean.” The “I” whom he mentions is assumed already to know exactly what he means, independent of any and every linguistic resource for expressing what he means. He then only needs to look around for the convenient means, or to invent them if they do not yet exist.

But real people sometimes have the experience of struggling toward what they mean. They may grope for words, not completely knowing what they are after until they find a way of saying it. Or, even after they have said it, they may sometimes have a dim sense that they expressed themselves inadequately, but they have no idea how to proceed to “invent” ideal linguistic resources that would allow them to grasp even for their own benefit what they are groping after. They are experiencing the limitations of their finiteness and of their own grasp of language.

Maybe in Searle’s key paragraph the “I” is something like a corporate “I”: it tacitly includes all investigators and language innovators, who might together introduce further distinctions and clarifications in the way that they talk. Searle is right that any language has potential for innovation.

³⁴ Elsewhere Searle indicates his awareness of ambiguity (Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 117).

³⁵ Searle, *Speech Acts*, 19-20.

But if that is all that he means, his wording is infelicitous. The use of the singular “I” suggests that any limitations can be overcome by a single individual who unproblematically knows what he means. There is a real danger that Searle’s statement will be understood in a way that ignores the limitations that belong to actual speakers. The “I” in question then becomes a superhuman “I,” an “I” who magically ascends above all the influences and limitations of any particular culture or particular language. This “I” has achieved a transcendent, masterful position. Philosophy sometimes claims to have risen above the limitations of any one language, and to know what is cross-culturally universal merely from rationally clarifying its vision from within one language and culture.³⁶

There is a danger here that those who use speech-act theory may smuggle in unexamined assumptions. Do they assume that a speaker has essentially god-like powers over language, and god-like powers over his own meanings? And since a move of that sort is a considerable idealization, how can they afterwards guarantee that the results of the idealization will have actual relevance, rather than being pertinent only to a hypothetical world constructed for the convenience of philosophical cleanness? And, further, does this particular idealization run the danger of collapsing the distinction between God’s infinitude and our finiteness as these meet one another in divine communication?

VII. *Plurality of Languages and Cultures*

By speaking about the possible inadequacy of “existing languages,”³⁷ Searle has also bypassed another important question, namely the question of *differences* in cultures and languages, and the difference that they might make. To put it another way, speech-act theory bypasses the etic-emic distinction.³⁸ That simplification can have potentially disastrous consequences, because one is undertaking to analyze all languages by analyzing only one (in this case, English). All the discussion is intended to be etic, completely universal. But it conveniently uses English and the broader context of scholarship in the Western tradition as its context for what it hopes will be culturally universal truths. The results are stimulating and suggestive. But the method is unsound anthropologically.

With respect to the canon of Scripture, we need to reckon with the spread of the gospel to all nations and all languages. This spread is not trivial, since the

³⁶ In fairness one must note that John Searle’s book *Speech Acts* links itself with Chomskyan transformational generative grammar, which has a strong interest in linguistic universals. Speech-act theory might then appeal to the work of linguists as the basis for its assurance of its own cross-cultural universality. But, as observed (n. 32), generative grammar in the tradition of Chomsky has its own limitations, due primarily to its preference for rigor instead of complexity. Its internal structure minimizes the role of context, including context in larger bodies of discourse and context in culture. And so it is not suited for wrestling with the full complexities of cross-cultural understanding. It too cannot achieve a full, true transcendence above the limitations of cultures.

³⁷ Searle, *Speech Acts*, 19-20.

³⁸ On etic and emic, see Pike, *Language*, 37-72.

nations must be delivered from spiritual bondage. Speech-act theory, by overlooking the etic/emic distinction, minimizes the challenge here.

VIII. *Exactitude*

Next, one can observe an idealization in Searle's expression "exact formulation."³⁹ Whether or not Searle's book intends it, such an expression opens the door to the idealization in which we conveniently forget or suppress variation and distribution, and retain only contrastive-identificational features in an idealized sentence. "Exactness" in philosophical circles too easily connotes perfect precision in concepts (no variation), and perfect isolation from context (no distributional influence), both of which are idealizations for the sake of a certain kind of cleanness or neatness.⁴⁰ More rigorous results can then follow. But the rigor is obtained at the price of certain forms of artificiality.⁴¹

In contrast to this artificiality, communication within the Bible is contextually rich, and often literarily rich as well, with interaction between text and context. The Bible includes the open-endedness of metaphors as well as the greater exactitude of literal expressions of doctrine. We need to beware of a premature collapse of this richness.

IX. *Sentences and Speech Acts*

Searle's book also simplifies by correlating a single sentence with a single kind of speech act. For example, the book says that a speaker in uttering the sentence "Sam smokes habitually" is characteristically making an assertion.⁴² This act of asserting then contrasts with the act of asking a question, using the sentence, "Does Sam smoke habitually?" That certainly makes sense, but it lays aside the way in which particular contexts help to determine the nature of a particular speech act. "Sam smokes habitually" might be said by a speaker to a listener within a context where both know very well what Sam's smoking habits are, but where the main topic of discussion is the foolishness of habitual smoking, and its effects on health. "Sam smokes habitually" is then not exactly an "assertion," as if it were intended to inform the listener of something he probably does not yet know, but more a reproach, or a comment on Sam's lack of foresight.⁴³ Or the speaker might use the same sentence in another context, in

³⁹ Searle, *Speech Acts*, 18.

⁴⁰ In fairness to Searle, it should be noted that several times he indicates awareness of fuzzy boundaries in the meaning of key concepts.

⁴¹ See Poythress, "Truth and Fullness of Meaning"; and the discussion of limitations of Aristotelian logic in Vern S. Poythress, "Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til's Idea of Analogy," *WTJ* 57 (1995): 187-219.

⁴² Searle, *Speech Acts*, 22-23.

⁴³ In the circumstances I have envisioned, would the speaker be likely to say, "I assert that Sam smokes habitually"? No, I think not. The speaker does imply the truth of the proposition that Sam smokes habitually. But he typically would not use the word "assert" if he intends his remark as a reproach.

which he and his conversation partner have been talking about various ways in which they might honor Sam as their leader and exemplar. What habits should they adopt in imitation of him, in order to solidify their comradeship? Then the sentence is not an “assertion” as much as an indirect proposal about one such habit that they might adopt.

The exact force of an utterance does depend on context. Searle’s book projects itself to some extent by noting that these phenomena appear not with complete and utter uniformity, but “characteristically,” and “in appropriate circumstances.”⁴⁴ It specifies at one point that the speaker “is speaking literally.”⁴⁵ It later acknowledges the possibility that “one and the same utterance may constitute the performance of several different illocutionary acts.”⁴⁶ And Searle’s discussion of “indirect speech acts” supplements the analysis of simple, direct speech acts.⁴⁷

But it is easy for less skilled practitioners to forget indirect speech acts, and to suppress the multitude of possibilities for contextual influence, especially in the form of the literary context of whole paragraphs and larger discourses—what Kenneth Pike calls distribution as a part of a structural sequence.⁴⁸ This is not a trivial simplification, since one of the points of speech-act theory is to see particular sentences in the context of human action.

With respect to the Bible, one implication is that we cannot always read the human purpose of a sentence in the Bible directly from the form of the sentence, its interrogative or imperative or indicative form. We must look at context, and be sensitive in our full humanity to the multiple possible dimensions of communication.

X. *The Isolation of Illocutionary Force*

Next, Searle introduces a key distinction between propositions and illocutionary acts:

Since the same proposition can be common to different kinds of illocutionary acts, we can separate our analysis of the proposition from our analysis of kinds of illocutionary acts.⁴⁹

The key example, which Searle has already introduced, involves the same “proposition” about Sam and his smoking, but with four possible illocutionary acts:

1. Sam smokes habitually. [asserting]
2. Does Sam smoke habitually? [asking a question]
3. Sam, smoke habitually! [giving an order]
4. Would that Sam smoked habitually. [expressing a wish or desire]⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Searle, *Speech Acts*, 22.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁷ Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 30-57.

⁴⁸ Pike, *Linguistic Concepts*, 62-64.

⁴⁹ Searle, *Speech Acts*, 31.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 22. The remarks in brackets are my own explanatory additions to Searle’s text.

The distinction between propositions and illocutionary acts does make sense, since we can see the distinction in action in this and any number of other cases. It is a valuable distinction. But it is not “pure”; that is, it does not *separate* two aspects perfectly, in such a way that there is no longer interaction or entanglement. Searle himself recognizes a remaining interaction when he notes that with questions that ask “how?” or “what?” or “why?” the “propositional” aspect consists not in a full proposition but in an *incomplete* proposition:

“Why did he do it?” is represented as ? (He did it because . . .) [where the ellipsis “. . .” indicates that the proposition is incomplete].⁵¹

But there are also other, subtle interactions. Assertions are typically made about states of affairs from the past, whereas commands and requests are typically made concerning potential states of affairs in the future. In assertions, the reference and the predication can often be made quite definite: “This tree branch fell down in the last storm.” But an order concerning the future may sometimes presuppose conditions that affect the ability of the order to refer and to predicate. “Tomorrow cut down the bottom tree branch on this tree” presupposes that you will still be alive tomorrow to perform the task, and that the tree branch in question will be there waiting (rather than having fallen down in a storm tonight, or cut down by someone else during the night).

In his sample case about Sam smoking, Searle neatly avoids some of the problems of time by making the proposition “habitual.” “Sam smokes *habitually*.” It is not about past or future time, but it is a general affirmation about all times. But there are still subtle influences. Typically, an assertion that “Sam smokes habitually” focuses on the past, about which the speaker knows. By contrast, the command “Sam, smoke habitually!” focuses on the future, and is unlikely to be given as an order to Sam if Sam already smokes habitually. So the predication “smokes habitually” is not quite the same in its temporal relation to the real world in the two cases. In other words, when we try to reduce these two propositional expressions to completely atemporal propositions, we must spell out explicitly the temporal conditions, and we end up with two distinct propositions in the two cases. “Smokes habitually” as an assertion means “smokes habitually (looking backward in time).” “Smoke habitually” as a command means “smoke habitually (looking forward in time).”⁵²

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵² Searle might escape using the route of idealization already mentioned: he is not actually talking about any actual language, including English, but about idealized propositions that are exact in meaning. But now we are traveling into the area of artificial language that may have no implications for any actual language.

Another kind of idealization takes place when we move from live performatives to the theoretical idea of illocutionary force. In English, we may if we wish make explicit what kind of speech act we are performing, by adding a “performative” expression such as “I assert,” “I promise,” or “I ask.” But in these cases, the performative expression is itself qualified by a larger context, so that it is not perfectly “pure” and isolatable. “I ask you, ‘Are you going?’” does not usually mean exactly the same thing as “Are you going?” It may connote by its explicitness that the speaker is somewhat “on his dignity.” He already knows the answer, or he is trying to force an answer from a reluctant

For the sake of rigor, Searle wants an exact separation of the two components, as can be seen from the fact that he introduces a rigorous symbolic notation:

The general form of (very many kinds of) illocutionary acts is

$$F(p)$$

where the variable “F” takes illocutionary force indicating devices as values and “p” takes expressions for propositions.⁵³

The point is that “F” is notationally separated perfectly from “p.” Rigor is achieved by ignoring the subtleties in natural language that involve entanglement of the two.

In the Bible we meet the full richness of divine and human natural language, contextually entangled language, whose purposes involve interlocking dimensions: both a propositional dimension and Jakobson’s “conative” and “expressive” dimensions.

XI. *The Ordinary Reader*

And here, does the “ordinary” reader or listener often have the advantage? I suspect that many an ordinary reader has tacitly known all along about speech acts.⁵⁴ That is, he knows the difference between questions, requests, commands, songs, sermons, parables, and reports.⁵⁵ Of course, these categories are emic categories that may then differ from one language to another. But human nature has sufficient unity so that the ordinary reader still appreciates to a considerable extent how different kinds of utterances differ in their purposes. And then he probably does *better* than the theoretical analyst, because he responds as a whole person, who appreciates multidimensional purposes, rather than as an analyst, who is inhabiting an analytical behavioreme according to which he stands one step removed from full interaction with the textual communication.

The analyst, by stepping back, achieves a kind of human analogue to transcendence. But he remains finite, a flesh and blood human being. His own analytical activity is an analytical behavioreme, which is in turn subject to analysis that uncovers purposes and assumptions and sins of which he is not yet aware.

XII. *Philosophical Purposes in Speech-Act Theory*

We may also consider the more long-range purposes of speech-act theory. One of its short-range purposes, as we said, is to focus on and make clear how utterances occur in the context of human action. At that point its purposes

addressee, or he indicates that in some other way the relation between speaker and addressee is peculiar. His main commitment is still to ask a question, but the way that he asks has additional emotive, conative, and phatic implications (see Jakobson, “Closing Statement,” 353-58).

⁵³ Searle, *Speech Acts*, 31.

⁵⁴ On tacit knowledge, see Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1967); Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

⁵⁵ J. L. Austin, introducing his lectures on speech acts, modestly comments, “What I shall have to say here is neither difficult nor contentious; the only merit I should like to claim for it is that of being true, at least in parts” (Austin, *How to Do Things*, 1).

overlap with those of linguists, especially socio-linguists and linguists who focus on “pragmatics,” that is, the use of language in the context of human action.⁵⁶

Nowadays there are many interdisciplinary crossovers. So we would be oversimplifying to say that speech-act theory belongs to the tradition of philosophical investigation of language. But there is still something to be learned here. Ludwig Wittgenstein did not use the terminology of “speech acts,” but in his later period his examination of “language games” shows attention to language use in a context of human action, and in the broader context of “forms of life.” “Forms of life” are next door to what we have discussed concerning the diversity of human cultures. Wittgenstein, then, begins reflection on speech acts without using the terminology. And what is his purpose? There may be many purposes, but one is to dissolve philosophical conundrums by examining the ways language is used in ordinary life and in philosophy.⁵⁷

And so we come again to the problem of transcendence. Philosophy sometimes asks deep and searching questions about wisdom. It asks the big questions about reality, knowledge, and the human condition. One way that it might approach such questions is through reflection that focuses on metaphysics; that is, it focuses on what is, and on what is reality. Classical Greek philosophy primarily followed this route. But Immanuel Kant declared this route to be impossible because of the limits of human reason. According to Kant, epistemology, that is, the study of what can be known and how it can be known, becomes the primary key for answering the other big questions, and—significantly—for showing which questions are impossible to answer because of the limitations of our finite condition.

Twentieth-century philosophy shows a turn from epistemology to language. If we know how language functions, we may be able to dissolve or dispense with questions that arise from ill use of language. Limitations in language play here a role analogous to the role played in Kantian philosophy by limitations in human reason.

Speech-act theory, as used in the philosophical tradition, can then potentially serve as a key to understanding language. Speech-act theory is richer than the earlier tendency to think only in terms of disembodied propositional truths. But it can be a key only if it does not truncate the full richness of language. Truncating that richness would be likely to have the long-range effect in philosophical reasoning of truncating the world about which language can be used to speak. And so speech-act theory, precisely because it does not capture the full richness of language, cannot capture either the full richness of personhood, or the full richness of God the infinite Person in whose image we human persons are made. No. If we expect speech-act theory to provide the first few steps, if

⁵⁶ Gabriel Falkenberg notes that, mainly due to Searle’s work, “problems such as those of illocutionary forces, utterance meaning and context interpretation are in safe keeping in linguistics proper today [1990]” (Falkenberg, “Searle on Sincerity,” in *Speech Acts, Meaning and Intentions*, 130).

⁵⁷ One may observe a similar interest in J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, in that he explicitly addresses philosophers (pp. 2, 38); and in John R. Searle, in the very title of his book: *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*.

not the complete ladder, to transcendence, we will either be disappointed, or we will delude ourselves into accepting a counterfeit claim to transcendence.

I also wonder whether speech-act theory is going to be treated by some people as if it were an *alternative* rather than an added dimension that would supplement a focus on propositional truth.⁵⁸ For many people who want to avoid the responsibility of submitting to objective truth, it would be convenient if all questions about truth could be transformed into a subdivision of sociological analysis, where we look at what people do to other people through words. But questions about truth will not go away. One common speech act is *assertion*, where a person makes a claim about truth.⁵⁹

Let me put it another way. Speech-act theory can be an insightful contribution to a larger whole, by focusing on one dimension of human action. But it runs up against limitations when we try to make it into a tool for achieving philosophical wisdom. The genius of speech-act theory is to teach us to pay attention to the meaning that utterances receive through embedding in a larger context of human purposeful action. But context, its strength, is also its weakness. Sentence-level utterances occur in the context of larger discourses. Discourse takes place in the context of human action. Human purposeful action takes place within the context of culture, and culture in the context of cultures, in the plural. And cultures occur in a context of a world and a world history whose interpretation differs from culture to culture. And that, as the postmodern relativists have seen, can lead to an ultimate relativism in the whole human project. In the end, such relativism at a high level, relativism generated by multiple cultures, injects relativism back down into the meaning of any speech act—unless there is a transcendent adjudication of truth. God gives wisdom; God brings reconciliation between man and God and between cultures.

And about this God, God himself speaks in Scripture. Our understanding of God, of ourselves, of our salvation, of the purposes of history, of the nature of humanity, and of the nature of human speech—all are bound to be transformed as we receive his instruction (2 Cor 10:5). Therefore, though speech-act theory may be helpful as a benefit of common grace, we cannot commit ourselves to its keeping, as if it were a completely trustworthy, independent source for telling us what is and what is not taking place in the Bible.

⁵⁸ Paul Helm expresses this concern eloquently in an internet posting, "Propositions and Speech Acts," <<http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/>> (accessed 1 May 2007). J. L. Austin makes it clear that in his view particular speech acts presuppose or imply a host of truths (Austin, *How to Do Things*, 45-46). So Austin clearly does not make his approach an *alternative* to a concern for truth, but rather a supplement or complement to it.

⁵⁹ Moreover, the sociological analysis concerning what people do to one another has a deep interest only because it makes definite claims. These claims, whether tacitly or explicitly, are claims concerning truth.